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Board of Education Members, Teachers, and Parents:

My name is Elise Backman, and my purpose for speaking with you today is to discuss the topic of improvement upon education for gifted learners in New Jersey's public schooling system. It is a known fact; America exists today because it demands the education of its citizens. New Jersey, like all of the other states of America, has positives and negatives pertaining to its public education. Identifying and fixing these "negatives" is crucial to improving upon New Jersey's public education.

One of these "negatives" includes a lack of challenges and help for gifted learners in our classrooms. Although gifted learners may be able to achieve comprehension of the curriculum at a fast manner, it does not mean that they are finished learning. There are several programs that can be instituted that would challenge gifted learners, and provide opportunities for them to excel in many subjects. Like children who may be diagnosed with special needs in New Jersey's public education system, gifted children need different forms of education too. By creating specific gifted programs and instituting a mandate for following certain guidelines, the state will be giving gifted children what they deserve in public school.

One way in which programming for gifted children can be improved upon is by the state mandating obeying of the "Pre-Kindergarten-Grade Twelve gifted Program Guidelines", suggested and distributed to all public schools in the nation since 2004. If these standards were abided by, gifted children would receive equal representation in educational programming, but they are unfortunately not abided by in all schools.

For example, Shrewsbury Borough School, located in Shrewsbury, NJ, has not followed the standards created by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), and as a result has unfairly represented gifted children in their school district. One standard the school broke was standard 3.2 minimum, located in program and design, which states "A continuum of services must be provided across grades pre-kindergarten-grade twelve." Shrewsbury Borough School, a pre-kindergarten-eight grade school, only offers a gifted program for third grade and older students, and thus does not follow standard 3.2. This program only admits students based on a test taken in the third grade, and that student remains in that program until he/she graduates from the middle school. This action is another instance of breaking an NAGC standard, student identification four, which provides: "All student identification procedures and instruments must be based on current theory and research." Shrewsbury Borough School thusly brakes another standard by basing admittance into their gifted program by an identification that could be up to six years old, and is thusly not current. Therefore, Shrewsbury Borough School is a prime example of a school which does not obey the NAGC standards, that if abided by would create sufficient gifted programming.

Quite the opposite of Shrewsbury Borough School, another school, approximately ten miles north of Shrewsbury in a town called Holmdel, NJ abides by all of the standards in the guidelines, and excels beyond them. Holmdel public schools provide gifted programs that challenge their students to their capabilities. An example of the excellent programming for the gifted students is their ability to sustain an advanced math course when Shrewsbury Borough School could not as a result of disregarding its significance due to lack of representation for gifted children. A possible reason for Holmdel having such extraordinary representation for gifted children is that its parents happen to be especially academically inclined, as many of them work at Lucent Technologies, located in Holmdel, which is a occupation that requires "inclinations" of the parents. As a result, these parents are extremely active in their children's school, and especially advocate for programming for gifted learners.

Both Holmdel and Shrewsbury schools are public, and thus, the state has an obligation to equally represent and provide for the students enrolled in the school. Therefore, the state must give equal representation to gifted children in each public school so that they are able to encounter stimulating challenges that every student deserves to have in their education. If the standards that would easily provide for sufficient gifted programming were mandated by the state of New Jersey, gifted children would receive equal and beneficial representation through programming.

Another method in which the state can use to improve upon gifted programming is by separating classes based on criteria discussed in the NAGC standards. There are many benefits to a separation of classes, including the equality of selecting students to enter their designated classes. A test would be administered, which would be based on the subject that would be necessary knowledge in order for the student to enroll in the "advanced class". A teacher recommendation would be another instrument in determining whether a student should enter into the "advanced class". These criterion would be abided by the standards already set by the NAGC standards, and the separation would therefore be fair. This

separation of classes would actually not only allow gifted learners to expand their knowledge of certain subjects, but also be beneficial to all students. Separating the classes would provide smaller class sizes, thus giving students a better opportunity to be helped individually. Not only will students receive more attention, but they will also be able to understand the curriculum of their class better. The comprehension of subject material will improve if classes are separated because all students will have an equal opportunity to learn at the pace they are comfortable with, as each class will be formatted to address the student's particular needs. However, when teaching students homogeneously, only some students will benefit from the pace of the curriculum, because it is the acceleration that the student is comfortable with learning. Without the separation of classes, the teacher directing the class can only choose one pace of learning, which in every instance will not suit every student's needs. In fact, the lack of separation of classes in public schools across New Jersey is one of the chief causes for the statistic of forty percent of New Jersey's eighth graders failing the math exam in 2005. Therefore, in order to rectify the issue, a separation of academic classes in New Jersey is needed, and will benefit all students.

Beyond the walls of the classroom, gifted programming could include a "deeper understanding" of the subject material which would present a stimulating challenge to gifted children. One criteria of a "gifted child" is for them to learn at a fast pace. As a result of their ability to learn in a fast manner, comprehension is achieved quickly, and students can become bored in the class, which is not a favorable situation for students in school. Separating academic classes could present more challenges for these children, but other mediums should also be offered. One medium that could be used to challenge gifted children is self-taught work. In lieu of a separation of classes, which may not be available due to budget issues or many other factors, extra work could be given to students, that would at least present a significant assignment for the student. The state mandate of the availability of such work would create more representation for gifted children, and thus improve their programming in New Jersey. Work would be allotted by the teacher, and therefore the distribution process would be fair because he/she would know the child's learning capabilities, and would be able to accordingly assign advanced work.

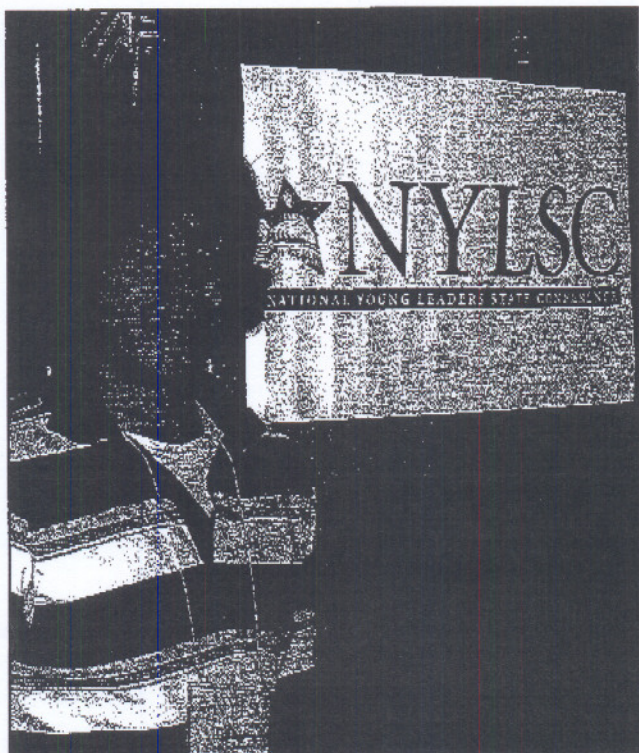
Another manner in which gifted children can find "a deeper understanding" of subject matter would be through applying basic knowledge they have learned into further creative discovery, experimentation, and communication, through such mediums as mock trials or research papers. The challenge to find and utilize the correct outlet for applying their knowledge is the core of excellent programming for gifted students. Thusly, the state should provide means of attaining such mediums and opportunities, which if instituted would greatly improve upon the programming for gifted children.

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Unfortunately, our state has a tendency to label disabilities in students rather than abilities. Gifted children are a part of the student body enrolled in New Jersey's public education system just as much as any other student is, and thus must be represented equally through equal standards of programming. Because gifted students have different needs than others, they cannot be taught just by a general education; they need special programs that will give them a deserving opportunity to be challenged. Challenges in programs for the gifted students can be sought out through abiding by the NAGC standards, separating academic classes, and providing mediums for "a deeper understanding" of the curriculum. All of these methods of programming will give gifted children a challenge, and, in several ways, benefit all students.

I find the following quote to represent the entire education problem in New Jersey that involves the need for more educational programming for gifted students. At a board of education meeting in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, board members and parents discussed the demolishing of the advanced math program. (For several reasons - particularly because the board of education saw making a separation of classes as giving gifted students an advancement in education that other students did not receive.) At this particular board of education meeting, on board member was quoted saying: "It is our job to serve the public when we make decisions. We cannot have an advanced math class, or we will not be serving the entire public." However, the fact is, by destroying the program, the board of education was favoring one type of student over another. Is it not that every student is deserving of their educational needs in the public school system? If so, then improvements upon programming for gifted students in New Jersey must be made.

Thomas McGovern Attends NYLSC in Princeton



Thomas McGovern was chosen to represent New Jersey at the National Young Leaders State Conference (NYLSC), which is sponsored by the Congressional Youth Council (CYLC). The conference was held in Princeton, New Jersey on September 14 - September 19, 2006. Presently, Thomas McGovern is a freshman at Allentown High School, however, Thomas was nominated by an educator from Upper Freehold Regional Elementary/Middle School last year during his 8th grade school year.

He was recognized as one of a select group of students who has achieved academic excellence, and exhibits maturity and the responsibility to represent Allentown at this unique leadership program for exceptional young leaders.

Actively involved in the Peer Leaders Club at the Upper Freehold Regional Middle School, Thomas is now an active participant in the Lifesavers Club at Allentown High School. He also is involved with the high school Youth Group that services the Allentown Community. In addition to his academic responsibilities, Thomas enjoys music, the performing arts, and sports activities.

According to Thomas, the NYLSC was "an awesome experience! I learned numerous valuable leadership skills and techniques that I will be able to use now and for the rest of my life." Thomas continues to share, "I also improved my social skills, because going into the experience, I knew no one. Coming out, I have made many friends that I am sure I will stay in touch with for many years to come."

The Western Kentucky University Center for Gifted Studies is sponsoring two contests to increase the awareness of needs of children and youth who are gifted and talented. Students can work individually or as a team. There are four divisions: Gr. A-6, MS, HS, and College.

Public Relations Video Contest and Public Relations/Illustrated Speech Contest. There will be first, second and third prizes in both categories. For more information, go to www.wku.edu/gifted or contact tracyman@wku.edu. All entries must be postmarked by March 1, 2007.

The Gifted Wish List

By Elise Backman, Student

It is a given that gifted children are for the most part not challenged in schools today. Parents of gifted children are rarely given any school-related options to further enhance their child's education.

What if your school board allowed any program for your child's education? This is actually a difficult question as the needs of children differ. Though there is not one specific recipe, there are methods that satisfy intellectual needs of gifted children. The ideal learning experience can be related to Center for Talented Youth (CTY). In the summer of 2006, I attended a CTY program in Loudonville, New York. Their academic program was extremely enriching. The "instructors" were keen to the fact that the students participating in the program wanted more than just "information." As a result, the instructors taught us skills and ways to think that challenged our creativity, and made us think more deeply than just solving the situation at hand. We also contributed to several projects. By applying our creative thinking skills to meaningful work, we felt we were seriously contributing in ways like important adults must think and act. For me, this changed my perceptions as I saw my thinking/learning as being significant.

Relate this experience to what gifted learners do in school. Teachers must teach more than just information. They must teach thinking skills that challenge learners to think in ways that may someday help the world. Allowing students to think deeply and apply their ideas to meaningful work would, most definitely, satisfy learning desires in gifted children.

Gifted children are often unhappy in classrooms because they do not get the education they deserve. However, some ways to make a gifted learner happy is to let them choose their own curriculum, allow them to move to a higher level, encourage them to think beyond just "information," and to contribute to the world they live in as they research what sparks their passion. These methods will enable gifted children to learn up to their capability.

This is the gifted learners' wish list. Grant these wishes and students will have the education experience they always have wanted.

Elise, age 12, is from Rumson, NJ